

## Books Make a Difference

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The problem of illiteracy is a current "hot" topic in library land, but this was one issue our library had not confronted until recently. Indeed, we had tended to pat ourselves on the back for doing a pretty good job. Being a tiny library in a small community (we serve a population of 4,300), we were pleased that in the last four years our circulation had almost doubled, and we had been able to do some rearranging and minor remodeling that let us better utilize our building—and all this with only small increases in staff. When we surveyed the community to assess our service prior to writing a long range plan, no one even mentioned literacy. The local Occupational Development Office had an ongoing program which appeared to be meeting the demand. This just didn't seem to be an area that we felt we needed to stretch our already "over-stretched" staff to cover.

### **A Change in Philosophy**

The first crack in our smug approach appeared in the planning sessions for the summer reading programs. It came to us that our charge in the battle against illiteracy was really in the realm of a literacy. We needed to wage war with what

ever it is that lets children who read when young grow up to become nonreading adults.

Our summer programs have traditionally been among the favorite activities for children in town. Our children's librarian always comes up with a dynamic theme and a multitude of activities which interest and excite the children, not to mention the vast number of food coupons we give away for reading books; the charts children get to put their names on, higher and higher as they read more and more titles, and the grand finale of an all day bus trip to some fun-filled place, hopefully on a sunny day. This whole philosophy of bribing children to read was beginning to make us nauseous. Coupled with the certain knowledge that it was as important for the slow reader to tediously advance through his minimum six books as it was for the gifted reader to breeze through his 106, we decided to change our approach.

Food coupons were the first and most definite thing to go. With obesity being one of the major contributors to poor health in this country, we decided to stop rewarding children with food. With no budget for any-

thing else, except the one day field trip, we had to devise something else. We were left with the only thing we had to offer: the love of reading, the personal satisfaction it can bring, and the fun and excitement we could put in our programs. Our ace in the hole was our children's librarian, Marcia Slead—loosely and inaccurately quoting Winnie-the-Pooh, "a children's librarian of uncommon brain."

Marcia planned the program using the theme "Around the World with Books." Each child was required to read six books and to attend four out of the six planned programs. The children were in teams by grade level; if they read more than six books then for each of those books they got to put a dried bean in a jar, which counted toward their total team effort. In order to encourage the reading of non-fiction titles, non-fiction counted two beans! The team which read the most books by the end of the program would have a balloon launch. Suzy Q. in the white organdy pinafore and blue hair ribbon (a fictitious child) still was encouraged to read 100+ books, but reluctant reader Hector (fictitious child number 2) was able to be just as successful because he could fulfill the requirements for the field trip by reading only six books.

As the program advanced with the groups traveling around the world, fiction and non-fiction books were introduced, and the children learned about the countries, their customs, life styles and food through a variety of games and activities. The children loved it. We learned we didn't have to bribe them to read; in fact, overall participation was up 25 percent.

This project also left us with the realization that we have a responsibility to attract all segments of our community to the library. Merely by getting people who value libraries to come in more often and to move more

books, we are not effecting a significant change in our community.

We needed to reach non-users, and help them recognize the value of books as a source of information and personal growth and pleasure. This value grows out of a prolonged and positive exposure to books and reading. Providing this exposure for children at risk became one of our program goals.

### **Formation of a Mothers' Club**

In an attempt to raise the overall functioning level for these economically and socially disadvantaged groups, the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, the Carroll County Welfare Office and the Delphi Public Library formed a coalition. The Welfare Office identified and targeted the group, the Extension office agreed to provide the educational program for the adults and the library planned to provide a preschool experience for the children. According to figures supplied by the Carroll County Welfare Department, in 1987 an average of 86 adult women, 4 adult men and 166 children received welfare, and 200 homes qualified for food stamps. Thirty percent or more of this group was estimated to read on or below the sixth grade reading level.

A Mothers' Club was formed with a curriculum including cooking, parenting, hygiene and consumerism. For their regular monthly meetings, the Home Economist prepares and presents a program which is aimed at increasing the knowledge of the mothers in one of those areas. Not only is there instruction, but the participants also have a chance to participate with a hands on learning experience.

The children attend a monthly preschool program at the library while their mothers are at the Mothers'

Club. Preschool sessions include all the facets of a regular story hour such as finger plays, stories, books, songs, crafts and games.

It quickly became apparent that one obstacle to the adult program was the lack of a proper background which would have given the participants the tools to appreciate the new ideas and techniques presented to them. THEY SIMPLY DID NOT THINK OF A BOOK AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION. At the same time they were not passing this value system on to their children.

### The Book Distribution Project

Our library applied for a LSCA Title II grant through the Indiana State Library for funds to buy books to place in the homes of the participants in the Mother's Club. We felt it was doubtful that libraries would be capable of attracting this group as users until we could change their mindset. We needed to convince these non-library users that the information they can gain from books can not only enhance their lives, but also can make a change in the quality of their daily living. We proposed to give the attendees of the Mothers' Club and their children the types of books that could bring about this change—the same type of books that many people would not think about conducting their lives without. We wanted the books right there in the home so that when a problem arose participants would have a book on their reading level available to help them. Information when they needed it, where they needed it. More importantly, we wanted their children to see their parents turning to books as a solution to a problem.

Juxtaposed with this was the book program for the children. To enhance the joy and pleasure which can come from books, we wanted to provide the

children with "beautiful," "wonderful," and "expensive" books which were carefully chosen for these children in the same thoughtful way middle class mothers would shop for their own children. "It is a great thing to start life with a small number of really good books which are your own."<sup>1</sup>

Although this program would attack illiteracy from a different aspect than the norm, we felt the placement of quality informational and literature books in the home to be a valid approach. We wanted to be able to change value systems about the printed word and to be able, somehow, to close one of the gaps between the haves and the have nots. Information and knowledge are the real tools of power.

We received notification in August 1988 that our project had been accepted for funding. We were to receive \$4,500. This would allow us to present approximately six books to fifteen mothers and thirty children. The first books were distributed in October to the children; they were *Tomi de Paola's Mother Goose* and *Tomi de Paola's Nursery Tales*. The first book to the mothers was the *Better Homes and Gardens Step-By-Step Cookbook*. In December, both groups received books. The children received *The Christmas Gift* by McCully, a title highly recommended in *School Library Journal* as one of the best current Christmas books for children. *Let's Make a Memory* by Gloria Gaither and Shirley Dobson was given to the mothers.

### Evaluation

Our response so far? Far better than we had hoped and, at the same time, disappointing. It is difficult not to judge by our own standards—not to gauge responses by what we feel is appropriate.

After an all-out publicity campaign, including the distribution of flyers to school age children in all county schools and a monthly direct mailing to the home of each welfare or food stamp recipient, we still do not have an abundance of mothers and children begging to become a part of the program. Attendance is up from an average of five with a total enrollment of eight mothers, to a total enrollment of twenty-one with an average attendance of fifteen. The number of children we have been able to reach has been lower than we had anticipated. We have found many of the mothers do not have children of preschool age. Attendance usually varies between five and six children. After several of the older siblings of the children who had received books came into the library and talked about the books and said they wished they too could receive books, we have decided to expand the age parameters. Books have already been given to children who were in the nursery ages two or young three's. In the summer we will run a summer club for the school age children similar to the summer reading program, but which will include a book distribution. This will be limited to children whose mothers are in the Mothers' Club. They will be able to request the type of book they would like to receive and will assist in the selection, but the final selection will be made by the staff and will be based on the quality of the book both for content and format.

The response to the books has been expectedly strong. The children do care about books. They tell us about older brothers and sisters reading to them; they have special places to store their books; and one little girl said that now even Daddy reads to her. When the December books were distributed, one child told us he was going to keep his books "forever and

forever." The mothers have been equally enthusiastic. They talked with the Home Economist about the recipes they had tried and several commented they had "never had a cookbook before." Another said she had had one, "but had given it to her sister." They all seemed to be delighted with the Memories book and the type of information it contained. Four of the ladies sent me thank you notes.

Most grant programs have complicated measurement and evaluation systems. Except for the feedback that we can get from the participants we have none. We feel the intrinsic value of this program cannot easily be measured at this time. The program was designed to plant a seed in the minds of the participants. It was indeed a risk for the ISLAC committee to fund this project because so many factors can affect the growth of a seed. We in Indiana are well aware of the risks one has to take in order to produce a bumper crop. However, one thing is certain—there can be no growth if that seed is not planted. We cannot know if this program will be a success unless we can see into the future and see that these adults parent better or provide more capably for their families; that their children perform better in school and have a better outlook on life. We can only hope these children will grow not only to use public libraries but to love and value the knowledge they contain.

## Reference

- <sup>1</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door*. London: Smith Elder and Company, 1907.